

College Basketball Pioneers in North Carolina

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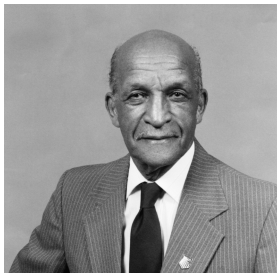
If you are like many North Carolinians, you have a favorite men's college basketball team. You can watch that team play on television, listen on the radio, or follow on the Internet. Many lucky fans even get to watch the games in person, sometimes in arenas that hold 20,000 people.

North Carolina teams are not just popular. They are very good. Between them, teams from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (five), Duke University (four), and North Carolina State University (two) have captured 11 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships. Nine of them have come since 1982.

Smaller schools such as Guilford College, North Carolina Central University and Barton College have won national titles in their divisions, too. Some of the sport's most famous coaches and players are associated with North Carolina schools.

It hasn't always been this way. College teams first played basketball in North Carolina in 1906. But football remained the most popular college sport for decades. Minor-league baseball was just as popular. Local schools sometimes boasted good teams, but the best college basketball usually was played in northern cities like New York or Philadelphia or at schools such as the University of Kentucky, the University of Kansas, or Indiana University.

Things began to change in the 1940s, when two extraordinary coaches arrived in North Carolina. John McLendon and Everett Case were not Tar Heel natives. Neither had ever played a second of college basketball. But they made their marks on the sport.



Coach John McLendon,
ca. 1994. *Image courtesy
of the North Carolina
Museum of History.*

McLendon was born in Kansas in 1915 and majored in physical education at the University of Kansas. As an African American with some Delaware Indian ancestry, McLendon was not allowed to play on the university's racially segregated team, which would not have its first African American member until 1951. But he did study basketball with one of his professors, James Naismith, the man who had invented the game 1891.

In 1940 the 26-year-old McLendon became head coach of the basketball team at North Carolina College (NCC, now North Carolina Central University) in Durham, arriving from the Kansas Vocational School near Topeka, Kansas.

Most aspects of southern life remained segregated, or separated, by race in the 1940s. NCC played in the CIAA, formed as the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association and later named the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association. This conference consisted of historically black colleges and universities; "colored" was a term used at the time for African Americans. These teams did not play against white schools and got little coverage from newspapers, magazines, or radio.

Yet, McLendon began to impress observers with his willingness to try new things and his ability to make them work. One of his early teams enjoyed little size. He created an offense—a team's system for trying to score when it has the ball—designed to force bigger, but slower, opponents to chase his players. He called it "four in a corner." Twenty years later, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill coach Dean Smith modified this system into his famous "four corners."

McLendon also was one of the first basketball coaches to use a fast-break offense. This means that the team with the ball rushes down the court before the other team has time to set up its defense. Games became faster, with more scoring. NCC's Rocky Roberson scored 58 points against Shaw University in 1943. He was the first college player to score more than 50 points in one game.

McLendon's greatest contribution may have come in 1946, when he helped start the CIAA Tournament. This championship tournament, held in March, gave the conference more exposure than ever before. Still very popular, the event now takes place in Charlotte and is the second-oldest conference tournament in the nation. Only the Southern Conference Tournament is older.

Following the 1952 season, McLendon left NCC with a record of 264 wins and 60 losses. He coached Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University (now Tennessee State University) to the 1957, 1958, and 1959 National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) titles. In 1969 McLendon became head coach of the Denver Rockets of the American Basketball Association, a professional league that would merge with the National Basketball Association in 1976. He was the first African American to serve as head coach of a major pro sports team in the United States.

A few years after McLendon arrived on the scene in Durham, another important basketball innovator came from the Midwest to nearby Raleigh. Everett Case had been born in Indiana in 1900. He was a great high school coach in that state and coached in the U.S. Navy during World War II. In summer 1946 Case took over a North Carolina State College (now N.C. State University) team that had finished 6–12 the previous season.

Case brought some top Indiana high school players with him. They became known as "Hoosier Hotshots." State became so popular that officials had to cancel a contest against

rival North Carolina on February 25, 1947. The game was supposed to have been played at State's Thompson Hall (now Thompson Theatre). So many fans tried to crowd into the facility that the city fire marshal decided conditions were unsafe. Some fans had even tried to climb in through restroom windows.

N.C. State teams coached by Case won games and championships, capturing the Southern Conference Tournament each year from 1947 through 1952. State joined the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) when it formed in 1953. Case's squad won the first three ACC Tournaments. Like McLendon, he favored fast-break basketball. Fans loved the style and so did high school players. Case was able to attract top athletes from across the country.

Case became a promoter of his sport, as much as a coach. When Reynolds Coliseum opened on the college's campus in 1949, Case had a decibel meter installed. This device measured how much noise the crowd made. He introduced to the South the tradition of the winning team cutting down the nets after a championship. Spotlights in a darkened arena helped introduce his Wolfpack players in an exciting way at the beginning of home games. Case often visited local civic clubs to bring attention to college basketball.

His greatest success may have been the very popular Dixie Classic, which started when Reynolds Coliseum opened. This eight-team tournament took place between Christmas and New Year's Day. The state's "Big Four" of State, North Carolina, Duke, and Wake Forest played every year, along with four teams from around the country. The event ended after 1960, when several Wolfpack and Tar Heel players were found to have taken money to influence the outcome of games, for the benefit of gamblers.

Case's success forced rival schools to place more emphasis on the sport. After losing 15 straight times against State, North Carolina hired charismatic coach Frank McGuire away from St. John's, where he had built a successful program. The New York City native was able to recruit some of the best high school players from that area.

North Carolina did catch up with Case and State. In 1957 the Tar Heels finished undefeated and won the NCAA championship. The Tar Heels defeated the University of Kansas—and its imposing seven-foot-one-inch-tall superstar Wilt Chamberlain—54–53 in the triple-overtime championship game. That game was telecast over three North Carolina television stations. The next year, the ACC secured the nation's first college television contract.

Other area schools also hired new basketball coaches, opened new arenas, and spent more money on recruiting, all in an effort to catch up with Case. By the late 1960s, traditionally white schools, including North Carolina and Duke, had begun recruiting African American players. By the 1980s, women's college basketball began to grow in quality and popularity, as well.

All of the pieces were in place for the current popularity of college hoops in North Carolina. The next time you cheer for your favorite team, remember John McLendon, Everett Case, and the other basketball pioneers who helped make that possible.

**Jim Sumner has written numerous books and magazine articles about North Carolina sports. He retired from the Curation Section staff at the North Carolina Museum of History.*